DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 198 734 FL 012 171

AUTHOR Gonzalez, Ann
TITLE Ethnocentrism and Teaching Writing to Foreign Students.
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 10p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (10th, March 22-24, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Influences: *Culture Conflict: *English (Second Language): Ethnocentrism: Expository Writing: Higher Education: Rhetoric: *Second Language Instruction: Teaching Methods: *Writing Instruction: *Writing Processes

ABSTRACT

The rhetoric teacher's aim is to make the native English speaker cognizant of the thought processes he or she has been taught to use by the culture. This approach does not work with foreign students because perception, imputation of meaning, and construction of reality appear to be bound by the logic and grammar of the language we speak. The following steps are suggested for teaching expository writing to speakers of other languages in college English courses: (1) show the foreign student how the American English speaker's culture trains readers to react in particular ways to written texts: (2) encourage the students to become aware of differences in expectations in their own culture: and (3) require revisions, that is, rephrasing of sentences or restructuring of paragraphs to clarify content. It is proposed that the key to the problem lies in the recognition that cultural differences exist in all levels of communication, especially the written text, and that these differences should not be explored in terms of better or worse, but in terms of effective or ineffective for a particular audience in a particular setting. (AMH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED198734

ETHNOCENTRISM AND TEACHING WRITING TO FOREIGN STUDENTS

ANN GONZÁLEZ

UNIVERSITY OF COSTA RICA

In teaching freshman English composition to native Americans we generally assume that the student actually knows much more than he realizes. Although he may not be able to explain or analyze what he knows, he is already familiar with various ways to structure his ideas. He understands logical relationships, abstractions, specifications, and associations. The rhetoric teacher's first aim, then, is to make the native English speaker cognizant of these thought processes he has already been taught to use by his culture. Brooks and Warren in Modern Rhetoric, 1970, state the case:

> We remain convinced . . . that the best and quickest way to learn to write well is not through a process of blind absorption, or trial and error, or automatic conditioning, but through the cultivation of an awareness of the underlying logical and psychological principles . . . . To look at the matter in a slightly different way, the student learns to write by coming to a deeper realization of the workings of his own mind and feelings, and of the way in which those workings are related to language. (vii)

But this same approach, often used in some of the best texts for teaching English as a Second Language, rarely works with foreign students. Why not? Basically because such an approach rests on the notion that various patterns of arranging ideas hold universally constant; that is, that certain principles of thought and language are inherent to the human species despite variations in cultural mulieu. The problem is essentially

FL 012 171

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Ann González

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

one of ethnocentrism: that is, the mistaken belief that everyone formulates ideas and arguments in the same way no matter what language he speaks. Research in the areas of language and cultural relativism, however, indicates the weaknesses underlying such a position.

Robert B. Kaplan's classic study of "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education," published twelve years ago (Language Learning, 16 [1966], 1-20), outlines distinct variations in the ways that different cultures construct arguments. In short, it is dangerous to assume any sort of universal methods of cognition or even principles of logic. Perception, imputation of meaning, and construction of reality appear to be bound by the logic and the grammar of the language we speak. Only at the risk of being ethnocentric can the foreign language teacher take for granted his cultural situation and assume it to be universal.

So, while the best method of teaching an American student to write may be to make him cognizant of the workings of his own mind, this same approach tends not to work well with foreign students. What, then, are we to do? First: a teacher must show the foreign student how the American English speaker's culture trains readers to react in particular ways to written texts. Second: he must encourage the student to become aware of the differences between what Americans expect and what a reader of his own language expects from a piece of expository or argumentative writing. This step is particularly necessary when the suggestions for effective writing in English specifically contradict what a student knows to be good writing in his native language. It is important for the teacher to emphasize that he does not expect the foreign student to change his thinking patterns,

only to acquire additional ones which will be more serviceable to him in his written English. And third: as in any step of learning, the student must practice. He must write, analyze his work with the teacher's help, and revise.

The first step, explaining what Americans expect from a written text, is not so difficult. We do this every time we grade a paper. But explaining why we expect what we do is much more complicated. Nevertheless, we need to formulate reasonable explanations precisely because students seem to profit more from a suggestion when they can see it in perspective and understand just how important it is.

Take a minor problem--for instance, the run-on sentence. I have found that stating and restating the rules about punctuation has little effect on student papers. The rules leave students cold. Not only do they see them as meaningless conventions, but they absolutely refuse to be bothered with remembering or using them. Another approach works better. First, I explain that Americans are taught to read in terms of the sentence as a basic unit, that is, a subject, a predicate and a period. The traditional definition of a sentence as a complete thought is utterly ridiculous. Obviously for many foreign students (not to mention American students as well) a thought or idea may take a whole paragraph of sentences to complete. In many cultures and especially in the Romance languages, the idea, not the sentence, is the basic unit, and the comma is calmly substituted for our semi-colon. Second, I show how Americans are taught to read a comma aloud--we pause without breathing. Since the use of punctuation varies from culture to culture, this is an important point. Finally, I

read aloud a sample run-on from a student theme all in one breath, never stopping until I read the period. A little dramatics never hurts: the bluer the teacher's face turns at this point, the better. This technique not only makes the point, but also allows the foreign student a chance to turn the tables and laugh at Americans, which is good now and then for his morale. He knows that a person from his culture has enough common sense to breathe when he needs to and not when he is told to by the placement of a period. But he will at least consent to place periods at appropriate intervals so as not to suffocate his American reader.

Many other rhetorical problems can be tackled in the same way, by explaining how we are taught to read and formulate ideas. For instance, we are not trained like the Orientals to juggle numbers in our heads. We always write down even the simplest computation because we have a visually aided memory. We use the same principle in dealing with ideas. Americans feel much more comfortable following an argument if the ideas are placed on the page in numerical order, lists, categories, and point for point comparisons. In the same vein, we are not trained to pick out and remember subjects and verbs separated by great distance as is often the case in the Romance languages. For this reason we prefer short, terse sentences to long, digressive ones. Furthermore, American culture trains us to be concrete; we demand specific ideas and examples in a paper; we love statistics; and American students by far prefer a multiple choice examination to essay questions. But for many cultures following an abstract idea or argument presents little difficulty and concrete examples are considered to be relatively unimportant details. Most dismaying for many foreign students is the realization that Americans tend to be

extremely literal readers. We do not like to be forced to read between the lines or deduce information for ourselves. We want every minor point spelled out, every "this" or "he" or "it" clarified, no matter how redundant, repetitive, or condescending it may appear to people of other cultural-stylistic expectations. Often I find that the picture of the American stereotype being too busy and practical to waste time on the aesthetics of writing is a useful teaching device. It helps explain why we concentrate on clarity, simplicity, balance, and a linear structure rather than on beauty. The point is to search for the rhetorical expectations of the American reader and then to encourage the student to discover where these expectations may differ from his own.

The second step, then, to encourage the student to compare how an argument is set up in English with the rhetorical patterns he believes to be effective in his own language, is a simple matter of maintaining a neutral or non-ethnocentric stance. First of all, students respect this position. They feel that they are honestly being helped to survive the frightening experience of culture shock. Second, maintaining a non-ethnocentric position forces a teacher to examine the often ignored areas of formulating ideas and thought patterns, what in classical rhetoric is called invention and arrangement. The discovery of what a thesis is and where or where not an American will expect to find one, what appropriate support means to the American audience, and what, psychologically, the best pattern or patterns of arrangement are for different topics and different types of American audiences are central concerns in the writing process. Unfortunately for foreign students, these concerns are often overlooked

while the EFL teacher and text feel compelled to teach grammar. But grammar is really not the main issue in a writing course. Obviously, a student must be fairly fluent in English to enter a freshman English class in the first place, but those verb agreement errors and idiomatic difficulties, that is, the mechanical aspects of style, should be the logical concern only in the final polishing stages of writing. It is frustrating and of doubtful value to aid a student (foreign or American) in making a piece of writing grammatically correct if its contents seem confused or illogical. While style may be the issue, often for foreign students the confusion results from their attempts to apply to English rhetorical methods that are effective in their native language.

A Latin American student I taught who seemed completely fluent in English and who was considered to be a good writer in Spanish wrote unreadable papers. Style was not at fault; he wrote lovely, syntactically and grammatically correct sentences. But his favorite trick was to write papers where the thesis was never directly stated, only alluded to, where evidence had to be found between the lines and deduced from sketchy information, and papers which spent pages giving background information before clarifying the topic under discussion. His former English teachers had pointed out these errors but the student kept repeating them and concluded that he just could not learn to write well in English. But one thing is to point out errors; it is something else to explain to a student why he might be making them. This student was not stupid; he was simply applying Spanish rhetorical devices to English. No one had ever explained to him that the patterns for constructing an argument vary from culture

to culture, and no one had helped him see exactly what Americans expect from an expository or argumentative piece of writing.

The EFL rhetoric instructor must be sensitive to these issues and bring cross-cultural problems explicitly to the writer's attention. The student writer must understand how an American reader will react to his writing, why the American might be confused, why the student's logic might not be clear to him, or why his method of arranging support may not be effective for an American audience. After students understand the principles of invention and repeatedly practice one or more rhetorical patterns for arrangement, many apparently stylistic weaknesses disappear. Remaining difficulties with stylistic conventions or effectiveness can then be carefully isolated and analyzed. Often in this area of rhetoric as well there is a cultural difference, or a gap in the EFL student's grammatical training in English, or an idiomatic peculiarity of the English language at the root of the problem. The key to solving these stylistic shortcomings with foreign students and, I believe, with American students as well, resides in the third step: the teacher's willingness and ability to require revisions of students' writing.

Requiring the EFL student to revise his written work is more a matter of logistics than of theoretical usefulness. Grading and regrading papers takes time. Some English instructors do feel, however, that revisions provide little help to the student since most students do not revise; they only correct mechanical errors (spelling and punctuation). This tendency to avoid meaningful revision, however, would seem to result not so much from a student's lack of discipline, interest, or intelligence as

from his ignorance of how to go about the process of rewriting. The goal, then, is to teach the student how to revise his paper, to make suggestions that are specific enough for him to understand where a particular problem lies without rewriting sections of the paper for him. One strategy which helps the student and minimizes grading time is to point out only invention and arrangement flaws in the first drafts and to delay until the final third or fourth drafts any suggestions for polishing the more mechanical aspects of grammar and style. A student's complete rephrasing of sentences and restructuring of paragraphs to clarify content often allows him to catch and correct his own mechanical errors. A simple reminder from the rhetoric instructor at the end of a paper to look for spelling mistakes or verb agreement errors will guide a student in revision without forcing the teacher to circle every error.

These three suggestions, then, 1) teaching students what Americans expect from a written work, 2) comparing rhetorical methods cross-culturally, and 3) requiring revisions from students--all form part of a general strategy which the rhetorician faced with teaching writing on the college level to non-native speakers of English should keep in mind. While considering the possible usefulness of certain techniques, the ESL instructor should remember that his strategies all reflect his underlying attitude toward language and culture. The key to the study of teaching English to non-native speakers and to the development of a methodology designed to resolve problems in this area lies in an unethnocentric approach, in the recognition that cultural differences exist in all levels of communication, especially the written text, and that these differences should not be explored in terms of better

or worse, correct or incorrect, but rather in terms of effective or ineffective for a particular audience in a particular setting.